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ABSTRACT

The effects of the television advertisements for Richard Nixon and George McGovern during the 1972 presidential election were tested by a content analysis of television programing and statistical analysis of viewer attitudinal response. Programing content for Nixon developed more general issues and did not especially feature the personality of Nixon. McGovern's television programing concentrated on a few issues in detail and stressed the candidate's personal qualities. Viewer response to Nixon commercials was neutral. Reaction to McGovern's media campaign was positive on the issues, but his personal qualities did not excite the viewers. Viewers with high exposure to the candidates' commercials and to television news programs tended to rank-order the campaign issues in the same way as did the commercials and news programs. (CH).

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LEARNING FROM COMMERCIALS:

The Influence of TV Advertising on the Voter Political "Agenda"

by

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On television, the commercial is always strikingly present--there are commercials to sell cars, toothpaste, gasoline, mouthwash, and a host of other products. Increasingly, in season, this includes political candidates. The popular suspicion is that political advertising on television has an influence over voters, that it helps "sell" candidates. This attitude is readily apparent in the literature of popular criticism of political advertising, perhaps most notably in the McGinniss book about the 1968 Nixon television campaign.¹ Many voters apparently feel the same way: a Gallup poll commissioned by the Foote, Cone and Belding advertising agency in 1972 revealed that while "people tend to feel that tv advertising for political candidates is less believable than tv advertising for products... almost two-thirds of the (1,467) people feel that political advertising on tv had some effect on the outcome of the 1972 elections."²

Whether or not political advertising is effective in "selling" candidates to voters, politicians behave as if it is. In 1972, Senator George McGovern reportedly spent over \$8 million on media advertising after he won his party's nomination; the same source reports that President Richard M. Nixon's re-election committee spent about \$6 million on media advertising during the same period.³ It has also been estimated that candidates at all levels spent a total of nearly \$500 million to get elected in 1972.⁴

The campaign staffs of the presidential candidates had somewhat mixed feelings about the effectiveness of their advertising in the campaign. Both sides granted advertising at least some minimal benefits (perhaps rationalization in part) while also admitting that some of the money may have been wasted.

Peter Dailey, head of the Nixon advertising efforts, admits his group's task was made somewhat easier by mid-September poll reports which indicated a commanding lead for the President. As a result, according to Dailey, "It became apparent that our job was not to change attitudes, but to reinforce them. As a result, the decisions about what not to do with advertising became as important, or more so, as what to do." Charles Guggenheim, one of the leading figures in the McGovern advertising effort, stated that while advertising was very important in the capture of the nomination, its effects were inconsequential in the general election. About the only benefit he saw from McGovern advertising was the large sums of money raised by direct mail and other appeals for contributions.

The research evidence of the influence of advertising on actual voter learning or behavior is much weaker, however. DeVries and Torrence report that tv advertising is a relatively less important influence on voting decisions than the news content of the media or interpersonal contacts. McCombs' review of the literature of mass communication and political campaigns documents the findings that the mass media, of which advertising is an important part, generally have little impact on deeply held voter attitudes. On the other hand, preliminary analysis of data collected in 1972 by Robert D. McClure and Thomas E. Patterson of Syracuse University suggests that the Democrats for Nixon television commercials apparently had an important impact; they provided reinforcement for many Democrats who voted for President Nixon.

Agenda-Setting Function

Scholars have recently sought to learn if and how media news is translated into public issues. Daily the media provide an "agenda" of

news topics and issues. McCombe and Shaw discovered in a Chapel Hill study during the 1968 campaign that voters in the aggregate tended to rank order issues the same way the media did, especially newspapers and television.¹¹ "Pictures in the media" become "pictures in the head," as¹² Walter Lippmann would have it. While clearly media are limited in their ability to change strongly held attitudes, they do appear to be influential¹³ in telling us what to think about, if not what to think.

There is some evidence that advertising--as well as the news content of the media--plays a role in this agenda-setting function. Bowers found very high rank-order correlations between issues cited in newspaper political¹⁴ advertising and the issues considered crucial by the voters.

This study sought to find what issues were emphasized in the 1972 McGovern and Nixon television advertising, how well voters could recall those issues, and how often they cited these advertising issues--the advertising agenda--in a role play description of one or the other candidates to a friend. Presumably the issues which a voter learns are vitally related to the way he casts his vote. This paper blends the results of a content analysis of television commercials during the 1972 presidential campaign and results from a panel study of voters in Charlotte, N.C.

Hypotheses

1. High use of television for political news is positively related to high exposure to television political advertising, low use to low exposure.

Exposure to political advertising on television was operationalized as the voter's ability to recall television commercials for either of the¹⁵ presidential candidates. The relationship is posited simply as a logical one; the more one watches a medium, the greater the chance of exposure to all

its content. Atkin et al., in a study of the 1970 gubernatorial elections in Wisconsin and Colorado, found that voters could scarcely avoid spot
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commercials.

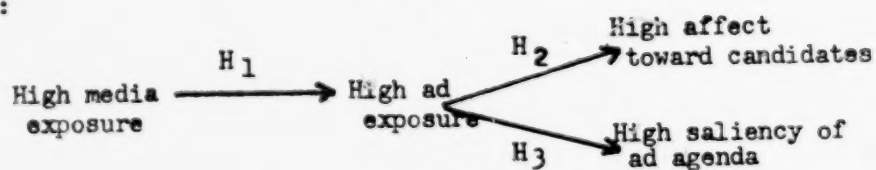
2. High exposure to television advertising is positively related to high "affect" in describing a candidate, low exposure to low "affect."

Salience of affect was operationalized as the obvious presence of
17
"feeling" in the voter's role-play description of each candidate. Through use of musical themes, skillful photography, and other techniques, the candidate can emphasize issues forcefully. Camera angle alone can
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communicate information and feelings. In short, this hypothesis argues that "affect" or "feeling", as well as information, is part of the agenda set by the candidate through his media advertising and is reflected in the agenda of the voter. In short, the voter acquires affect along with the more issue-oriented ad content.

3. High exposure to television political advertising is positively related to the salience of issues which voters use in describing a candidate. Those highly exposed will more often use the "agenda" of issues made salient in the commercials.

This hypothesis argues that the commercials are successful in communicating an "agenda" of campaign issues to the viewers of the commercials. The repetition of themes in ads--often simply the same ads--gradually builds up the salience of certain issues which one associates with a candidate. Here the candidate has the opportunity to hammer away at the same themes again and again (if he can afford it) while the themes and issues emphasized in the news have to be filtered through a series of gatekeepers over which he has no control.

The relationships suggested by the three hypotheses are shown in this diagram:



Method

During the last three weeks of October (9-26), 1972, a person-to-person survey was conducted among 246 randomly-selected voters in Charlotte, N.C. The survey sought to obtain information about what issues voters generally regarded as most important (without regard to what media were saying) as well as determine what media people actually used. The survey also obtained demographic and political involvement data. (The October survey was the middle wave of a larger three-part panel study of the influence of the media agenda generally during the campaign. Other survey data, not used here, were gathered in June and November.)

During the October wave, simultaneously with the survey, the main evening news programs of all three networks, as well as a sample of the local press, were content analyzed to determine what the media actually were talking about from day to day, both in news and advertising. This provided base data to compare with what people cited as the issues with which they were "most concerned about" during the campaign. The
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commercials which appeared between the hours of 8:50 p.m. and 11 p.m. were monitored on all three network stations, Monday through Friday of all three weeks. Coders of the commercials noted the type and frequency of different themes used in the commercials. For both Nixon and McGovern, the themes which appeared most often were those which dealt with (1) Vietnam in one way or another; (2) unemployment or problems with the economy; (3) foreign relations, including Red China and Russia; (4) the "environment," or ecology, in one aspect or another; (5) drugs or drug-related problems, especially related to young people; (6) busing of school children; (7) "corruption" in government; and (8) "public welfare" and attendant
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social problems.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows that while 24 McGovern and 29 Nixon commercials in the period surveyed covered eight major topics, they emphasized them²¹ differently. The McGovern commercials concentrated very heavily upon Vietnam, unemployment, and welfare while the Nixon ads ranged relatively widely over the eight topics. The Nixon commercials also stressed more topics within a single commercial (1.8) than did the McGovern ads (1.6). In terms of issue emphasis, McGovern hammered harder.

Hypothesis 1. Those who reported high use of television for political news were much more likely to report seeing a commercial for Nixon. Of those reporting "very little" use of tv, only 4% reported seeing "many" commercials for Nixon. For those who made "some" use of tv, the figure rose to 12% and of those who said they used tv a "great deal" for political news, 28% said they saw "many" commercials for Nixon. For McGovern, the same trend emerges. As use of television jumps from "very little" to a "great deal", the increase in reports of seeing a commercial climb from 0% through 12% to 20%. For both Nixon and McGovern, Chi Square differences were significant at $<.01$. Apparently exposure to television is related to exposure to commercials, perhaps for many a case of "incidental" exposure. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. The voters were exposed but did they "learn" anything?

Hypothesis 2. This hypothesis argues that learning can be divided into components, "affect" and "cognition." Both components potentially underlie changes in human behavior, in this case the antecedent to vote choice and actual voting. From the point of view of the politician, the objective is a vote for him, no matter how motivated. Hence television commercials aim

Table 1. Issue emphasis in Nixon and McGovern television advertising

<u>Issues</u>	<u>Emphasis^a</u>	
	<u>Nixon</u>	<u>McGovern</u>
Vietnam	34	50
Unemployment	17	58
Foreign relations	38	0
Ecology	31	8
Drugs	17	4
Busing	14	8
Corruption	0	13
Welfare	<u>34</u>	<u>25</u>
Number of commercials	29	24

^aTable reads as follows: In 34 percent of Nixon's 29 commercials there was at least one reference to Vietnam; in 50 percent of McGovern's 24 commercials, there was at least one reference to Vietnam.

at increasing positive affect toward the candidate by means of a wide range of artistic manipulations, such as use of music, slogans, and variation of camera angle. What results to the exposed voter, however, may not be positive affect; if he does not "like" the candidate or agree with the candidate's stand, the affect can as easily be negative. In short, a commercial can "backfire" for the candidate.²² But, the hypothesis argues, "affect" is communicated just the same, either in the form of "original" learning or as reinforcement for earlier feelings.

Table 2 shows the salience of affect shown toward Nixon when the voter was asked how he would describe him to a friend who was undecided on how

Table 2 About Here

to vote as compared with the amount of viewing of Nixon commercials. For viewers of Nixon commercials, the hypothesis failed. Nixon ads did not generate much salience among the sample voters. To some extent this may have resulted from the fact that voters long had seen Nixon in the news. Commercials for Nixon (in many of which he did not appear) may have reinforced older views rather than raised new saliences. In addition, the consensus of the "instant analyses" of the election results suggested that voters held stronger feelings about McGovern (both positive and negative)²³ than about Nixon, toward whom many voters apparently felt neutral.

At any rate, Table 3 shows that those who saw "many" or "few" commercials for McGovern were much more likely to express affect in describing him to a friend. (And much of the affect was negative.) About McGovern, however,

Table 3 About Here

much more than about Nixon, the voter had much to learn. At the presidential level, his was a new face, one not well known nationally. Hence, for the voter, there was a greater need for "orientational" information about McGovern--mere "room" to learn new information and feelings. McCombs has cited

Table 2. Relationship between recall of Nixon commercials and salience of affect in describing Nixon

Recall of Nixon Commercials	<u>Salience of Affect in Describing Nixon</u>			
	(percentages)			
	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(N)</u>
None	63.8	36.2	100.0	(72)
Few	63.1	36.9	100.0	(103)
Many	82.2	17.8	100.0	(45)
Total	67.2	32.8	100.0	(220)

Chi Square= 5.76 (ns)

Table 3. Relationship between recall of McGovern commercials and salience of affect in describing McGovern

Recall of McGovern commercials	<u>Salience of Affect in Describing McGovern</u>			
	(percentages)			
	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(N)</u>
None	66.7	33.3	100.0	(72)
Few	46.8	53.2	100.0	(111)
Many	<u>45.7</u>	<u>54.3</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>(35)</u>
Total	53.2	46.8	100.0	(218)

Chi Square= 7.83, $p < .05$

orientational need in explaining why newspaper editorials were more influential when talking about relatively minor issues, about which people knew little, than about major issues or people, where people already had well developed feelings or information. ²⁴ For McGovern, the hypothesized relationship between ad exposure and salience of affect was confirmed.

Hypothesis 3. Table 4 demonstrates the rank-order correlations (Spearman's rho adjusted for tied ranks) of various issue agenda. The "recall of ad issues" (B) refers to the issues that the voter could remember from the candidates' commercials. ²⁵ "General voter concerns" (D) refers to the issues cited by all respondents--even the ones who reported not seeing any television advertising--when they were asked to name the problem they were most concerned about. (In this analysis only the relative emphasis placed on the eight major themes which surfaced in the commercials are considered. It ignores the emphasis placed by some candidates on "personality" themes, a topic to be treated in a subsequent analysis.)

Table 4 About Here

For those viewing Nixon commercials, the correlation between the issue agenda they recalled from the ads and the issue agenda actually appearing--determined by the independent content analysis of the commercials--was +.962. For McGovern ad viewers, it was also high, +.947. In other words, the aggregate of voters was quite accurate in its recall of the issues which actually appeared in the Nixon and McGovern commercials.

Included in column and row (C) of Table 4 are voters who could recall television advertising for the candidates. The role-playing question asked them to "call up" the issues about each candidate which they regarded salient in describing that candidate to a friend.

Table 4. Rank-order correlations between various agenda

		Issues Cited in:			
		NIXON			
		(A) Actual Ad Content	(B) Recall of Ad Issues	(C) Description to Friend	(D) General Voter Concerns
McGOVERN	(A) Actual ad Content		.962*	.841*	.705**
	(B) Recall of Ad Issues	.947*		.976*	.795**
	(C) Description to Friend	.962*	.988*		.835*
	(D) General voter Concerns	.919*	.895	.879*	

* $p < .01$
 ** $p < .05$

Row and column (D) includes all voters, including many who could not recall seeing any advertising for the candidates. The relevant comparison, then, is (1) between the issue agenda of the actual ad content and the issue agenda of voters who were exposed to advertising and (2) between ad content agenda and the issue agenda of all voters, including those not exposed to television advertising. It was hypothesized that the correlation of comparison (1) would be higher than (2). This was supported for both candidates: $+0.841$ to $+0.705$ for Nixon and $+0.962$ to $+0.919$ for McGovern. The agenda of the commercials was more strongly adopted by the television ad viewers than by voters in general.

Another relevant comparison is (3) between the agenda recalled from ad content and the agenda in the description to a friend and (4) between the ad content agenda and the agenda of all voters, including those who were not exposed to tv advertising. The hypothesized relationship is that (3) will be greater than (4) if voters assimilate the issue agenda from the advertising to which they are exposed. The hypothesized relationship holds for both candidates: $+0.976$ to $+0.795$ for Nixon and $+0.988$ to $+0.895$ for McGovern.

Taken together, these comparisons suggest that the appearance of issues in the commercials raises the salience of those issues to those who are exposed to the commercials. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

As a final point, the data in Table 4 also suggest that the agenda in the McGovern advertising more closely matched the general voter agenda ($+0.919$) than the Nixon advertising matched the general voting agenda ($+0.705$). To agree with a candidate is not always to follow him.

Summary and Conclusion

This study blends results of a content analysis of the agenda of themes appearing in network commercials for Nixon and McGovern in the 1972 campaign

with the agenda used by a sample of voters asked to role-play what they would tell a friend if asked to describe Nixon or McGovern. The study focused on what voters "learn" from commercials not how, and if, they actually voted (the focus of a subsequent study). It hypothesized that voters who view commercials learn the issues emphasizedⁱⁿ the commercials in this way: high media exposure (tv)--->high ad exposure-->high affect toward the candidate (either positive or negative) and high saliency of the issues stressed in the commercials. For both viewers of Nixon and McGovern commercials, the hypothesized relationships were confirmed, except that viewers did not acquire greater affect with greater viewing of Nixon commercials.

Television commercials, of course, do not operate alone as a potential persuader of voters. Nor is the relationship clear yet between the issues emphasized in commercials and actual vote choice. Commercials, like other sources of communication, arrive in a tangled, complicated nexus composed of many strands of incoming information. But, considering the huge amount of money spent for advertising on television, the informational input of tv commercials, apart from other sources, deserves close attention.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Joe McGinniss, The Selling of the President, 1968 (NY: Trident Press, 1969).
- 2 "Study Shows Pol's Ads Less Credible than Products' Ads," Advertising Age, February 26, 1973, p. 10.
- 3 "Effective Advertising Let Nixon Keep Low Profile in Campaign," Advertising Age, November 13, 1972, p. 3.
- 4 E. B. Weiss, "Political Advertising Blackens the Other Eye of the Ad Business," Advertising Age, February 12, 1973, p. 35.
- 5 "House Agency Saved Nixon Bid over \$1 Million, says Dailey," Advertising Age, December 11, 1972, p. 3.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Walter DeVries and V. L. Terrance, The Ticket-Splitter: A New Force in American Politics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 77.
- 8 Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Information, Gratification, and Persuasion," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor, eds., Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (London: Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 169-194.
- 9 "Nixon Gain Found From his TV Ads," New York Times, November 26, 1972.
- 10 Maxwell E. McCombs et al., "The News and Public Response: Three Studies of the Agenda-setting Power of the Press," Paper presented to Mass Communications Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Carbondale, Illinois, 1972.
- 11 Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," The Public Opinion Quarterly, 36 (Summer 1972), pp. 176-187.
- 12 Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 3-22.
- 13 Bernard C. Cohen, The Press, The Public and Foreign Policy (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 8.

14 Thomas A. Bowers, "Political Advertising and the Agenda-Setting Function," Journalism Quarterly (in press).

15 The question stated: "The two presidential candidates have had advertising on television lately. About how many commercials do you recall seeing for (Nixon) (McGovern), many, only a few, or none?" The use of television for political news was ascertained by responses to the following question: "How much do you use television for news about political candidates and issues, a great deal, some, very little, or not at all?"

16 Charles K. Atkin et al., "Patterns of Voter Reception and Response to Televised Political Advertising in Two Gubernatorial Campaigns," Paper presented to the Theory and Methodology Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Carbondale, Illinois, August, 1972.

17 Voters were asked: "Suppose there was someone who was undecided about who to vote for in the presidential election. What would you tell that person about each candidate?" An example of a "high" affect response is the following: (McGovern) "He's two-faced. He's awfully wishy-washy, promising an awful lot. He probably can't follow through." An example of "low" affect would be: (McGovern) (He has) "a sincere concern for (the) American poor. (He has offered) "proposals to close tax loopholes." Similar examples could be cited for Nixon. "Feeling" or "affect" is basically an impressionistic judgment, one often difficult to make reliably. See Sid Shrauger, "Cognitive Differentiation and the Impression-Formation Process," Journal of Personality, 35 (1967), pp. 402-414. Generally those responses which were more dominant in affect--over rational listing or discussion of issues--were judged "high" affect; those with the reverse pattern were judged "low" affect. After two training sessions, intercoder reliability among three coders reached .80, which was judged acceptable.

18 See Lee M. Mandell and Donald L. Shaw, "Judging People in the News--Unconsciously: The Effects of Varying Camera Angles and Bodily Activity for Visuals," Journal of Broadcasting (in press) and Robert K. Tiemens, "Some Relationships of Camera Angle to Communicator Credibility," Journal of Broadcasting, 14 (Fall 1970), 483-490.

19 The question was : "First, what are you most concerned about these days?" (Probe) "Why is that?"

20 Coder interreliability was .88.

21 The table ignores a few miscellaneous themes--such as "McGovern--For the People"--which could not be conveniently classified. These themes were based on the words used in the commercials rather than upon the visuals or music employed. Visuals and music are difficult to classify.

22 See Atkin, Op. Cit.

23 See Newsweek, November 13, 1972, pp. 30-31; Time, November 6, 1972, pp. 42-43.

24 Maxwell E. McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence," Journalism Quarterly, 44 (Autumn 1967), pp. 545-548.

25 Voters who could recall seeing either "many" or "only a few" commercials for either candidate were asked: "What are some of the things you remember from those ads?" Only the issue first mentioned by voters is used in this analysis.